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ABSTRACT

The paper reviews Belgian philosophy toward the education of learning disabled students and cites the differences between American behaviorally-oriented theory and Belgian emphasis on identifying the underlying causes of the disability. Academic methods observed in Belgium (including psychodrama and perceptual motor training) are discussed and are explained to be similar to American remediation techniques. (CL)

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A BELGIAN APPROACH TO LEARNING DISABILITIES

Presented at the First World Congress on Future Special Education, Stirling, Scotland, June 28, 1978.

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ABSTRACT

The philosophy towards learning disabilities in Belgium differs dramatically from the behaviorally-oriented theory espoused by leading American educators today. Belgian educators stress the necessity of discovering the underlying causes of the learning disability in order to effectively remediate the problem. However, the academic methods observed in the Belgian classrooms do not differ fundamentally from techniques employed in American special education classes. This article describes some of the methods used in remediating learning disabilities in various Belgian schools.

A Belgian Approach to Learning Disabilities

In 1975-1976, I conducted an in-depth study of learning disabled children in Belgium. It became apparent that the Belgian philosophy towards learning disabilities is different from the current American school of thought. In teaching learning disabled children, many educators in the United States adhere predominantly to a behavioristic philosophy, and they utilize such approaches as task analysis. However, the prevalent philosophy in Belgium is that one must attempt to identify and remediate the underlying causes of the learning disability prior to and simultaneous with providing academic instruction to the handicapped child. In an attempt to remediate the causes of the disability, special educators in Belgium employ perceptual motor training, psychodrama, and various academic methods which emphasize a multisensory (VAKT) approach. Through observing several classes in the Belgian schools for children with learning disabilities, it was noted that this predominant theory has widespread acceptance and is practiced throughout Belgium.

The methods used in various special classes appear to demonstrate the belief that one should teach to the child's weaknesses. To accomplish this task, it is necessary to evaluate thoroughly the child's repetoire of skills and his present level of functioning. The Belgian Ministry of Special Education has designated Psychological-Medical-Social Centers, staffed with a multidisciplinary team of professionals, to evaluate all Belgian handicapped

children. A number of special schools have employed professionals from various disciplines, such as psychology and speech therapy, so that the school can institute a team approach in their remedial program. The use of a team of professionals for remediating learning disabilities is prevalent in the Belgian special schools, since it is thought to be an important component in the remedial program of the L.D. child.

Two special schools which were observed have adopted a team approach in their program for teaching children with learning problems. The first school, Les Blés d'Or, also prescribes avidly to the belief that one must first remediate the cause of the child's difficulty. Located in Brussels, Les Blés d'Or is directed by M and Mme Ugeux. Les Blés d'Or is staffed by a multidisciplinary team, composed of the teaching personnel, s psychologist, a speech therapist, and a neuropsychiatrist. According to Bouckaert, educational methods employed by the teachers are adapted and diversified for each child. Bouckaert portrays the roles of the psychologist and speech therapist as follows:

> they are occupied with troubles in language, reading, and writing. They make an exact analysis of the child's existing troubles and of his degree of maturity, in addition to the method of treatment which will be adapted to the child. (1974, p. 163)

A specialist in kinesthesia has been trained to administer "the appropriate exercises for the child so that he will observe his own body and will establish his corporal schema" (Bouckaert,

p. 165). The child's rhythmic movement is observed by the kinesitherapeute, and simple movements made by the child are analyzed. In addition to the observation of the child's coordination and adaption to his midline, observations also are made of the child's relaxation and control of his respiration (Bouckaert, p. 165).

The use of a psychotherapist at Les Blés d'Or is a unique feature not usually found in a special school for children impaired by learning disabilities. Workshops for the students, to aid them in expressing themselves, are conducted by the psychotherapist. One of the strong philosophies held by Mme Ugeux is that children who have learning disabilities often are better able to reveal their problems through gestures and play rather than through speech, because many of these children possess small vocabularies and have problems in verbal expression. The Free Expression Workshop, the psychotherapist's workshop in the school, allows the children to express themselves through a variety of means, such as painting and using puppets. The pupils are encouraged to exercise their creativity in the hope that they will externalize their problems. The psychotherapist also employs psychodrama in working with the students. The major reason behind this workshop, as noted by Mme Ugeux, is that "one can only work with a dyslexic child after one has determined the cause and the specific weaknesses of the child's disability" (Ugeux, Note 1). For individual children who are seriously afflicted by learning disabilities or behavioral troubles, a neuropsychiatrist is

available (Bouckaert, p. 165).

Initially, the curriculum encompasses fine motor training. The student receives instruction in painting, sewing, and other activities involving eye-hand coordination. When the child has developed the necessary fine motor control, he is taught to write. Directions on left, right, up, and down are stressed constantly to the child in order for him to develop an awareness of proper directions. Academic instruction is introduced to the child when he is approximately 7 years old. Reading is first taught through the methods developed by Romain and Quirit. The Borel-Maisonny method is used in reading instruction for children at about 9 years of age (Ugeux, Note 1). This latter method employs a gestural and phonetic approach in teaching reading. There is a gesture used to correspond to each letter and gestures for the letters are continued to be used by the teacher until the child has completely acquired the sounds and the corresponding letters (Dehant, 1968, p. 34).

Another school that was observed in Brussels for children with learning disabilities is Ecole Chazal. The first special school in Belgium for children with learning problems, Ecole Chazal has served as a model for many schools which have been formed since its inception. Mlle Delsart, the directrice of Ecole Chazal, takes an active role in working with the children. Moreover, the entire school is involved with the remediation of learning disabilities. The belief of the founders of Ecole Chazal is shared by Mme Lapeyre, a psychologist at the school. Their philosophy is that the best way to remediate children

with severe learning problems is by having the entire faculty understand and support the children and their disabilities (Lapeyre, Note 2).

With the exception of the language requirement, the curriculum provided for the students at Ecole Chazal basically is identical to the curriculum found in the regular schools. Because Belgium is a bilingual country, all children in the regular schools are required to study both languages of Belgium, French and Flemish. However, the children who attend Ecole Chazal speak French, and they are exempted from the requirement that they must receive instruction in Flemish. This exemption has been acceptable, according to Mme Lapeyre, since "Flemish has a difficult sentence structure, in addition to other complexities, and these problems make it difficult for dyslexic children to learn Flemish" (Note 2).

In addition to the directrice and the regular teaching staff at Ecole Chazal, the school employs two psychologists, a psychometrist, a speech therapist, and a nurse. The speech therapist plays an active part in the child's language remediation program. The staff believes that many of the children impaired by learning disabilities do not use enough words when they speak. To encourage oral expression, the speech therapist uses many pictures to stimulate conversations with each child in a one-to-one situation. The speech therapist is concerned also with the order of events, and she drills the student in this concept by letting the student put pictures in order of their logical occurrence (Lapeyre, Note 2).

The academic teachers at Ecole Chazal teach the children to "hear" each word before they ever learn to spell or read the word. Using a method of instruction developed by Borel-Maisonny, described previously, the teacher pronounces each word to be studied and follows with hand motions. The hands flow from left to right and follow the inflections in the voice. This method is based on the idea that it is important to visualize left to right as one is pronouncing words. Additionally, it is theorized that the child will be aided in learning to write the sounds in the order they are said. The students follow the teacher by pronouncing the words and copying the teacher's hand movements (Lapeyre, Note 2).

During the spelling lesson, the students use boxes which are about the same size and shape as a cigar box. Small tiles, similar to those used in the game of Scrabble, are kept in the box. Letters are printed on the tiles, and individual dividers keep the letters separated and in alphabetical order. The top of the box opens out and has a rack on which the letters are placed. The spelling words are dictated one at a time to the children, who attempt to spell the words by placing the letters on the rack. After each word is dictated, the teacher checks to see if it was spelled correctly. If not, she helps the children spell it properly. When the word is correct, the children then copy it in their notebook. The notebook entry is checked so that the students will not have an incorrectly spelled word in their notebook. One obvious advantage that was seen in this practice is that each student is less likely to reinforce a

misspelled word through changing lettered tiles than if he were to go through the motion of writing each letter. Furthermore, the child would be less likely to experience frustration by changing tiles than if he had to erase the word and rewrite it.

Before beginning writing lessons, the classes at Ecole Chazal participate in relaxation exercises in an attempt to loosen up the students' fingers and hands to facilitate movement. The students are not compelled to produce a large quantity of work; instead, they are encouraged to concentrate on the quality of the work. In a typical writing class, the teacher would write a word on the blackboard, and one student would copy the word on the board while the rest of the class would write the word in the air. After discussing the student's writing on the board, the teacher would instruct each student to copy the word in his notebook. Different students would be given the opportunity to write on the board while the remainder of the class would be involved actively at their seat.

An adequate amount of time is spent on learning to write each word. The teacher and students are constantly analyzing each movement involved in writing. After a complete sentence is written on the board, it too is analyzed by its parts, sounds, direction, concept, and meaning. Words are never crowded on the blackboard. No more than two or three sentences appear at one time in order to reduce the distraction of a "busy" board.

Inspired by the Chassagny method of writing, some of the faculty at Ecole Chazal have developed a unique method for

teaching writing to learning disabled children. The school has employed only cursive writing with the children and has not attempted to instruct them in manuscript writing. Each word is written without lifting the pencil until the word has been completed. Then the child may cross and dot the letters. The standard notebook paper of Belgium, which resembles the graph paper of the United States, has facilitated this writing process. The lines on the paper are evenly spaced and run both vertically and horizontally. This method of writing is used not only by the pupils, but also by the teachers at Ecole Chazal; and each new teacher is instructed on the proper procedures. Consequently, little variation in the teaching of a writing style has existed among the different teachers at Ecole Chazal (Lapeyre, Note 2).

In conclusion, the philosophy towards learning disabilities in Belgium differs dramatically from the behaviorally-oriented theory espoused by leading American educators today. Belgian educators stress the necessity of discovering the underlying causes of the learning disability in order to effectively remediate the problem. The deliberate inclusion of specialists, such as psychologists, speech therapists, psychotherapists, and kinesitherapeute, into the special school's staff, demonstrates the emphasis in Belgium in remediating the cause as well as the result of the learning disability.

However, the academic methods which were observed in the classrooms do not differ fundamentally from techniques employed in American special education classes. Such components in the

student's remedial program as teaching on the child's instructional level, overlearning, reinforcing what the child has accomplished, small groups, and using all sense modalities can be found in both Belgian and American special classes. Thus, although the philosophy surrounding learning disabilities appears to be different between the two countries, the implementation of these philosophies in the classroom is similar.

Reference Notes

1. Ugeux, Mme. Interview at Ecole Les Blés d'Or, Brussels, 12 December 1975.
2. Lapeyre, Mme. Interview at Ecole Chazal, Brussels, 24 September 1975.

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